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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the strategies used by westerners, particularly American, Canadians, and Britons, to assimilate linguistically with the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. The report begins with a brief chronicling of the history of colonialism and English usage in Nigeria. The study is then described. Based on observation of interactions between westerners and Yorubas, a list of 58 commonly-used terms and expressions in Yoruba, British English, Nigerian, and pidgin was compiled. Using this, a survey instrument was constructed to determine patterns of usage, attitudes, and stages of assimilation of westerners. Respondents (n=42) were scholars, professionals, foreign government employees, western-raised spouses of Nigerians, and university students. Results indicate that for many westerners, code-switching was necessary due to the amount of British English in common usage. Significant usage of pidgin words and word patterns was found. In addition, use of Yoruba words was found to be socially advantageous. Based on these findings, it is concluded that use of expressions in this list correlated negatively with expatriates' frustration levels in daily life in the region. Further research and development of findings is anticipated. (MSE)

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Linguistic Assimilation of Westerners Living in the Yoruba Area of Nigeria

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Linguistic Assimilation by Westerners Living in the Yoruba Region of Nigeria

> High on the hill, only a half mile from our house, you can look into the distance and see the sun disappearing into a thick, surreal haze that lies motionless on top of the great forest. You wish that you could see it clearly just once. You wish for a perfect view of the jungle at sunset, but it is always wrapped in its hazy blanket. It serves as a metaphor for Africa - never clear to outsiders. Always our vision is obstructed. We struggle to understand these African cultures, but they are mirages that we cannot get hold of.
>
> Nigerian Journal - Jan. 6, 1992

This paper is the central portion of a larger work on the assimilation strategies employed by Westerners who live and work in the Yoruba area of Nigeria. This section of the study concerns linguistic assimilation and will review the most common terms and expressions that Westerners learn in order to function more efficiently in Yoruba society.

For the greater portion of the last 500 years, assimilation in West Africa has been the story of the Europeanization and Christianization of West Africans. Western attempts to assimilate with Africans have been self-restricted to the acquisition of minimal competencies in pidgin languages which allowed trade to flourish, first in slaves and later in precious metals and even religion.

The period in which formal efforts to Europeanize the Africans was most evident was during the first half of the 19th century. Assimilationist policies were encouraged by the abolitionist movements in England and abroad, which resulted in the abolition of slavery by the British Parliament in 1808 (Burns, 1964).

To enforce the new law, a squadron of naval vessels was positioned near known slave ship routes to intercept smugglers and free their slaves. Many of the slaves were taken to Sierra Leone so that they could be culturally reprogrammed by the assimilationst experiment being conducted there (Spitzer, 1989).

As cruel as it may seem on the surface, the Sierra Leone community of Freetown was created by the good intentions of Britain's liberal societies which believed that it was "the white man's burden" to civilize and baptize the heathens of the "dark continent".

Charles MacCarthy, the governor of Sierra Leone, believed that the liberated slaves would "'yield like wax to any impression'"(Spitzer, 1989, p.56). His aim was to transform the Africans into civilized, industrious, English speaking Christians who would become productive members of the British empire.

The stages of assimilation training were these: first, the newly liberated slaves were taught English and Christianity; second, they were relocated from Freetown to surrounding villages with names like Leicester, Gloucester, Regent, Hastings, and Waterloo to learn trades; third, they were placed as servants in the homes of respectable Europeans where they could learn to model the civilized behaviors of their colonial masters. Spitzer (1989) explains that this process reflected the "cultural chauvinism" of the British since they stressed the values of European society and simultaneously belittled the native African customs and traditions as "heathen error" (pp.56-59)

From the perspective of the assimilationist proponents, the Sierra Leone experiment was judged a successful one. The most promising cultural and religious converts were often sent to England at the expense of the Quaker Society to undertake advanced study there and to return to Sierra Leone to serve as cultural and religious missionaries (Spitzer, p. 67).

By the end of the century, however, a new tide of racism was sweeping Europe, brought on by those who seized upon Darwin's theories as proof that the African aborigines were innately inferior and could never be Europeanized. They might learn to dress like Europeans, but they would still be savages underneath, was the central argument against further investment in projects like Sierra Leone.

As a result, the former slaves of Sierra Leone re-examined their path and concluded that they had "'lost the flavor of their race'" and needed to assert a new identity that was "African, not European" (Spitzer, p. 157). Thus began the process of de-assimilation in Sierra Leone.

Nigeria did not fare much better than Sierra Leone under British rule. Even the name "Nigeria" was selected by Flora Shaw, a British journalist. The boundaries of the country were drawn with an eye to maintaining peace with the other imperialist powers rather than considering the perpetual chaos that would be created in expecting traditional tribal enemies to forge a nation in unity (Metz, 1992, p. 3.)

In 1914, Britain reluctantly took on Nigeria as a colony, if for no other reason than to keep Portugal, France, Germany, and Holland from absorbing it as part of their African empires (Burns, 219). Subsequently, Britain

began the process of ruling Nigeria with firm administrative policies which were designed to build roads and railroads, develop trade, and educate the masses according to the British model of instruction.

English was made the official language of instruction in public schools and in government operations so that the Hausa, the Yoruba, the Igbo and the dozens of smaller tribes could have a common language. In 1948, The University College, in cooperation with the University of London, was established in Ibadan, Nigeria (Burns, p.272). The university, like the primary and secondary schools, used English as the official medium of instruction. More significantly, however, was the fact that the instruction communicated a reverence for all things European and a contempt for native African history and culture. This cultural contamination was so complete that by 1960 Nigerians themselves parroted the values of the British and were unimpressed with the unique artistic accomplishments of their ancestors (Shwarz, 1965, p. 241)

When Nigeria received its independence in 1960 it had been under British influence, to greater and lesser degrees, for over 100 years. During that time, assimilation was virtually a one way process. Africans were asked to adapt to European values and Europeans were discouraged from the ultimate expatriate sin of "going native". Since independence, however, Nigeria has reclaimed some of its cultural integrity, and Westerners are no longer informally discouraged from assimilating with the indigenous peoples of Nigeria. Indeed, if a Westerner wishes to live a comfortable life in modern Nigeria, he is well advised to assimilate

with the host culture in many ways. This study concerns the degree to which Westerners linguistically assimilate with the Yoruba people while living in southwestern Nigeria.

Methodology

This study employed an ethnographically created survey instrument to isolate the primary vocabulary and communication adaptations that Westerners commonly make in order to function more efficiently in Southwestern Nigeria.

First, I spent two months observing Westerners (Americans, Brits, and Canadians) in interaction with Yorubas, both in formal and informal settings. By maintaining the pose of a participant-observer, I was able to identify the terms and expressions that the expatriates used which were unfamiliar to me as a newcomer. I did this as a participant observer so that I would not influence the communication styles of those I observed.

Second, I compiled a list of the terms and expressions that were most common. It consisted of 58 items. This served as the heart of the survey instrument. To the vocabulary check list I added demographic questions, a first-impression, semantic-differential assessment scale, and 16 open-ended questions to understand the stages of assimilation.

Third, 65 copies of the survey instrument were distributed to every English speaking Westerner that could be found in the Ibadan area of Nigeria, providing that they had been in country for at least 6 months. 42 survey instruments were returned. Those responding to the survey included Fulbright Lecturers and Researchers, Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, research scientists from the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture, American Embassy employees, United States

Information Service employees, expatriate business professionals, expatriate professors, Western-raised spouses of Nigerians, and visiting university students from the United States, Canada, and Great Britain.

RESULTS

Yoruba Term	Code	American Equivalent	Percentage Using
go slow	P	traffic jam	95%
come-come	P	come here	30%
torch	B	flashlight	65%
trek	B	walk	90%
traveled	B	took a trip	95%
moto	P	car	50%
machine	P	motorcycle	45%
Baba	Y	father	70%
Madam	B	Mrs.	70%
Oga	Y	master	80%
next tomorrow	P	day after tomorrow	45%
minerals	B	soft drinks	85%
plenty	P	more than enough	70%
sabi	Y	understand?	25%
siesta	S	nap	15%
junior sister	P	younger sister	75%
epele	Y	sorry	45%
bring money	P	I accept your offer	75%
dash	P	bribe/tip	85%
fuel/petrol	B	gas	70%
abi	Y	Isn't it so?	55%
It is finished	P	We are out of it.	80%
sorry-o	P	sorry that happened	30%
today-o	P	playful language	50%
quick-quick	P	right now	40%
small-small	P	very little in portion	80%
lie-lie	P	you are lying	50%
oyinbo	Y	white person/foreigner	80%
welcome, you are welcome	N	come in	85%
one-one naira	P	one naira each	75%
ease myself	P	use the restroom	50%
don come	P	it/they are here	20%
collect	B	to get/pick up	40%
good morning good evening (formally)	N	good morning, oga good evening, madam essential greetings	85%
so daabe	Y	good night	5%
wahala	Y	confusion/trouble	85%
leave me	P	go away	30%
you know it?	P	are you familiar with it?	30%
off it, on it	P	turn it on/off	35%

kaaro	Y	good morning	70%
"psssssst"	Y	hey!	70%
beg for a ride	N	hitch-hike	20%
ekushe	Y	thank you	65%
kaabo	Y	welcome	65%
ah-ah	Y	I'm surprised/shocked	85%
eh-hehhhh	Y	Now you understand	70%
ehhhhhhhhh	Y	I understand	85%
lorry	B	truck	60%
windscreen	B	windshield	40%
boot	B	trunk	40%
juju	Y	voodoo	80%
nko	Y	What about me?	45%
ole	Y	thief	45%
ajebota	Y	spoiled	10%
toast	N	to come on to	15%

Y=Yoruba B=British N=Nigerian P=Pidgin

Though there are a good number of British terms in the list above, there were only 5 British subjects in the survey, which means that for most people surveyed, code-switching became necessary. For instance, Yorubas do not use the word "walk" much. "Trek" is the more common term. So North Americans must learn to say to the taxi driver: "Drop me here; I will trek it now." Or, if one's neighbors have taken a trip the proper expression is, "They have traveled." "Trip" is not readily understood.

Certain terms are described as Nigerian for being neither Pidgin nor British. They have unique Nigerian uses and meanings. "Good Morning" is one such expression. It is not merely a greeting of option, it is virtually required. One respondent said that he found Yorubas to be extremely cold people when he first arrived because they never responded to his "Hi, how's it goin'?" When he learned to use "Good Morning" and "Good Evening" he said that it was like finding the "key term that opens a computer

program - the whole culture opened up."

Nigerian Pidgin is often described as a trade language. It grew out of the need for transacting business across tribes and with the Europeans. "Only in the course of time, since it has become of great importance in the multilingual area as a medium of communication between people of various tribal origins, has the scope of its vocabulary increased constantly" (Barbag-Stoll, 1983, p. 53). Today there are newspaper columns written in Nigerian Pidgin. Television and radio programs, too, regularly use Nigerian Pidgin in their entertainment programs. It is so pervasive a language among the masses that Ndolo (1989) proposed that Nigerian Pidgin might be elevated to the level of "the national language" since more people speak it and since it would not have the stigma of colonialism.

For the Westerner who lives in Nigeria, some mastery of Pidgin is advisable, especially in the markets. The expression, "one-one naira" is a case in point. If one asks, "Are these bananas one naria each?", he will not be understood. "How much the bananas, now, one-one naira?" is much better.

The doubling of words for emphasis is another Pidgin characteristic. "Come-come, lie-lie, and small-small" are terms that evolved from people who were nonfluent in English. If one has a limited vocabulary, the doubling of words provides the function of adjectives. Thus if I wish you to serve me a tiny portion of food, I ask for a serving of suya, but "small-small".

"It is finished" in another Pidgin term that has widespread usage. It is used to mean, "we are out of

something". If you ask the petrol attendent if there is fuel, he may say "it is finished". If you ask for a Coke, you may be told "it is finished", meaning they are sold out right now.

The Yoruba word that is most used by Westerners is "wahala". It is used to describe confusion or trouble. Not only did 95% of respondents claim to use the word regularly, they also reported that it was a fun word to say. Given the rather chaotic condition of Nigeria, especially as perceived by a Westerner, "wahala" can be used often. "There is a 'go slow" ahead so there will be much 'wahala'". It can be used in the market, too. "I don't want wahala. Give me good price, now."

In general, the respondents who learned some Yoruba reported that their lives were improved dramatically by the little they learned. It was not that the words provided them with cultural efficiency, it was the "ten-fold return of Yoruba appreciation" for trying to speak their language.

The only conclusion that can be reached from the survey at this point is that there is a correlation between mastery of the language in the chart above and lack of frustration in day to day life. As this study continues, the phases of assimilation will be identified,terms and expressions not in the survey but listed by respondents will be catalogued, and nonverbal cues that add to one's cultural fluency will be discussed.

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